

Sepid Birashk
Berlin

Eternal Time, Temporal Eternity:

Rethinking Divine Life
with Schelling*

Ewige Zeit, zeitliche

Ewigkeit:

Das göttliche Leben

mit Schelling neu denken

Abstract

The Christian idea of God as a personal reality presupposes relation, response, and historical presence. In Islamic theology as well, divine personalness is inseparable from guidance, revelation, ethical responsibility, and God's living address to humanity. Yet classical metaphysical frameworks, shared across these traditions, have often conceived divine eternity in opposition to time, thereby rendering historical change, divine action, and relational presence conceptually problematic. This paper argues that the persistence of this tension points to a common metaphysical prejudice: the reduction of temporality and materiality to deficient or secondary modes of being. Rather than advancing a doctrinal resolution, the paper proposes a philosophical reorientation. Drawing on Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's speculative philosophy, especially *Die Weltalter*, it develops an ontology of absolute temporality in which time belongs to the inner life of the divine rather than standing outside it. Eternity is thus reinterpreted not as timeless stasis, but as a living, dynamic depth capable of grounding freedom, historical plurality, and embodied religious life. This framework opens a conceptual space beyond binary of time and

eternity in which Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions, particularly those affirming divine presence in historical and experiential forms, may be re-engaged without compromising divine unity or absolute-ness.

Keywords

→ Schelling

→ Weltalter

→ God

→ Spirit

→ Eternity

→ Philosophical

Religion

Zusammenfassung

Die christliche Vorstellung von Gott als persönlicher Realität setzt Beziehung, Antwort und historische Präsenz voraus. Auch in der islamischen Theologie ist die persönliche Natur Gottes untrennbar mit Führung, Offenbarung, ethischer Verantwortung und Gottes lebendiger Ansprache an die Menschheit verbunden. Doch klassische metaphysische Rahmenkonzepte, die diesen Traditionen gemeinsam sind, haben die göttliche Ewigkeit oft im Gegensatz zur Zeit verstanden und damit historische Veränderungen, göttliches Handeln und relationale Präsenz konzeptionell problematisch gemacht. Dieser Beitrag argumentiert, dass das Fortbestehen dieser Spannung auf ein gemeinsames metaphysisches Vorurteil hindeutet: die Reduktion von Zeitlichkeit und

Materialität auf mangelhafte oder sekundäre Seinsweisen. Anstatt eine dogmatische Lösung vorzuschlagen, schlägt der Artikel eine philosophische Neuorientierung vor. Ausgehend von Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schellings spekulativer Philosophie, insbesondere *Die Weltalter*, entwickelt er eine Ontologie der absoluten Zeitlichkeit, in der die Zeit zum inneren Leben des Göttlichen gehört und nicht außerhalb davon steht. Die Ewigkeit wird somit nicht als zeitlose Stasis neu interpretiert, sondern als lebendige, dynamische Tiefe, die Freiheit, historische Pluralität und verkörpertes religiöses Leben begründen kann. Dieser Rahmen eröffnet einen konzeptuellen Raum jenseits der Binärität von Zeit und Ewigkeit, in dem islamisch philosophische und mystische Traditionen, insbesondere solche, die die göttliche Präsenz in historischen und erfahrungsbezogenen Formen bekräftigen, wieder aufgegriffen werden können, ohne die göttliche Einheit oder Absolutheit zu beeinträchtigen.

Schlüsselbegriffe

→ Schelling

→ Weltalter

→ Gott

→ Geist

→ Ewigkeit

→ philosophische

Religion

Sumario

La idea cristiana de Dios como una realidad personal presupone relación, respuesta y presencia histórica. También en la teología islámica, la personalidad divina es inseparable de la guía, la revelación, la responsabilidad ética y el mensaje vivo de Dios a la humanidad. Sin embargo, los marcos metafísicos clásicos, compartidos por estas tradiciones, a menudo han concebido la eternidad divina en oposición al tiempo, lo que hace que el cambio histórico, la acción divina y la presencia relacional sean conceptualmente problemáticos. Este artículo sostiene que la persistencia de esta tensión apunta a un prejuicio metafísico común: la reducción de la temporalidad y la materialidad a modos de ser deficientes o secundarios. En lugar de proponer una resolución doctrinal, el artículo propone una reorientación filosófica. Basándose en la filosofía especulativa de Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, especialmente en *Die Weltalter*, desarrolla una ontología de la temporalidad absoluta en la que el tiempo pertenece a la vida interior de lo divino en lugar de estar fuera de ella. Así, la eternidad se reinterpreta no como una estasis atemporal, sino como una profundidad viva y dinámica capaz de fundamentar la libertad, la pluralidad histórica y la vida religiosa encarnada. Este marco abre un espacio conceptual más allá de la dicotomía entre tiempo y eternidad en el que las tradiciones filosóficas y místicas islámicas, en particular aquellas que afirman la presencia divina en formas históricas y experienciales, pueden volver a comprometerse sin comprometer la unidad o la absolutidad divinas.

Palabras clave

→ Schelling
 → Weltalter
 → Dios → espíritu
 → eternidad
 → religión filosófica

Introduction

The question of God's relation to time has long occupied a central place in philosophical theology. Within classical metaphysical frameworks, both in Christian and Islamic context, divine eternity has most often been understood in terms of timelessness, immutability, and absolute self-identity. God, conceived as perfect being, must not be subject to change; temporality appears, accordingly, as a mark of finitude, dependence, or lack. From this perspective, the idea of a temporal God seems to generate a series of well-known difficulties: how could an immutable being enter into temporal succession, respond to historical events, or undergo any form of becoming without compromising divine perfection? How could change be reconciled with absoluteness, or history with eternity? These tensions have been explored with great conceptual rigor within the traditions of philosophical theology, and recent scholarship has continued to refine and defend the classical position.¹

The present contribution does not contest the internal coherence of these arguments. Nor does it seek to replace them with a competing doctrinal account of divine temporality. Instead, it begins from a different observation: that the persistence of the problem points to a deeper tension, one that cannot be resolved on purely logical grounds. The difficulty surrounding a temporal God is not merely conceptual but existential. It arises from the fact that religious life, ethical responsibility, and historical self-understanding all presuppose a form of divine personalness that classical metaphysical accounts of time struggle to accommodate.

Religion, in its lived reality, does not relate to an abstract principle or an impersonal absolute, but to a God who can be addressed, who can call, command, forgive, and respond. Ethical life similarly presupposes more than an eternal order of values; it presupposes accountability across time, promise and obligation, judgment and hope. Moreover, the concrete forms of religious life unfold historically. Revelations are received, interpreted, contested, transformed. Norms

* A digital version of the article can be found: <https://www.ctsi.uni-bonn.de/zmr/aktuelle-ausgaben/zmr-110-2026-1-2>.

¹ Prominent examples include Brian Leftow's sustained defense of timeless eternity (e.g. *Time and Eternity*, 1991; *God and Necessity*, 2012), Eleonore Stump's Thomistic account of divine eternity and presence (*Aquinas*, 2003), and Edward Feser's contemporary Aristotelian – Thomist reconstruction

of timeless divine actuality (e.g. *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 2017). At the same time, this position has been increasingly questioned in contemporary philosophy of religion, particularly regarding divine action, relationality, and historical presence; see, for example in *The End of the Timeless God* (R. T. Mullins, 2016). The present study does not adjudicate this debate but seeks to rethink the metaphysical presuppositions that structure it.

emerge, shift, and sometimes fracture. None of this can be adequately accounted for if time is treated merely as a deficient mode of being, external to the divine life itself.

Yet classical metaphysical conceptions of time appear to render such personal and historical dimensions theologically problematic. If God is wholly outside time, relation threatens to become metaphorical, history secondary, and change either illusory or merely human. The result is a tension that is widely acknowledged but rarely confronted at its roots: the strict oppositional duality between time and eternity that in order to rigorously protect divine being from temporality makes it difficult to articulate the reality of a living relation between God and the world.

This paper proceeds from the hypothesis that the persistence of this tension is not accidental. Rather, it reflects a longstanding metaphysical prejudice that continues to shape theological reflection across traditions: the systematic devaluation of matter and its closest associate, time. Within much of the metaphysical heritage inherited by monotheistic theology, matter is conceived as inert, resistant, or merely receptive, while time is associated with imperfection, decay, and loss. Eternity, by contrast, is defined negatively, as the absence of succession, change, and differentiation. Such conceptual oppositions have proven powerful and enduring, but they come at a cost. By excluding matter and temporality from the inner life of the absolute, they render history, embodiment, and transformation philosophically secondary, if not suspect.

The aim of this paper is not to rehabilitate time by diminishing the absoluteness of God, nor to dissolve divine transcendence into historical process. Rather, it seeks to explore whether the problem itself might appear differently if the underlying metaphysical framework were shifted. What if time were not conceived as external to the absolute, but as belonging to its inner articulation? What if matter were not treated as that which limits or obscures divinity, but as a medium of its expression? Under such conditions, the question of a temporal God would no longer present itself as a contradiction in terms, but as a challenge to rethink the relationship between eternity, freedom, and history.

It is at this point that the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling becomes relevant. Schelling does not offer a doctrine of a temporal God in the conventional sense, nor does he seek to resolve theological paradoxes by speculative fiat. Instead, his later philosophy proposes a profound reconfiguration of the concepts of time, matter, and the absolute itself. Time is no longer reduced to a mere sequence of nows, nor is eternity defined in opposition to it. Matter is no longer conceived as passive substratum, but as dynamically involved in the self-unfolding of being. Most importantly, the absolute is not understood as a static unity beyond all differentiation, but as a living reality whose inner life includes tension, movement, and temporal articulation.

Engaging Schelling in this context does not amount to importing a specifically Christian solution into a broader theological debate. The significance of his approach lies rather in its methodological implications. To think a God capable of relation, history, and freedom

2 FRIEDRICH WILHELM JOSEPH SCHELLING, *Sämtliche Werke*, hg. von KARL FRIEDRICH AUGUST SCHELLING, Abt. II, Bd. 1, Stuttgart-Augsburg 1856 (hereafter cited as SW), 568. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

3 SW I,8,212: »Without this power, God is that empty infinite which modern philosophy has put in His place. It calls God the most unlimited being (*ens illimitatissimum*), without considering that the impossibility of any limit outside Him does not abolish the fact that there must be something in Him through which He closes Himself within Himself, in a certain sense making Himself finite

for Himself, making Himself an object. Infinity as such is no perfection; rather, it is the distinguishing mark of what is imperfect.«

4 FRIEDRICH WILHELM JOSEPH SCHELLING, *Die Weltalter. Fragmente*. In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813, hg. von MANFRED SCHRÖTER, München 1946 (hereafter cited as WA), 19.

requires not only a different ontology of time and eternity, but a transformation of philosophical method itself. Schelling's call for a speculative, creative, or aesthetic philosophy signals precisely this shift: a form of thinking capable of engaging living reality without reducing it to timeless abstraction.

The following pages will therefore not argue directly for the necessity of a temporal God. Instead, they will explore how Schelling's reconfiguration of time and matter opens a conceptual space in which such an idea becomes thinkable without contradiction. By doing so, the paper aims to suggest a possible philosophical horizon within which theology might rethink its relation to history, difference, and change, while preserving divine freedom and absoluteness. Whether such a horizon can be developed within different theological traditions including the Islamic, remains an open question. What is at stake here is not its resolution, but the possibility of asking it differently.

The Becoming God of Philosophical Religion

At the limit of abstract rational philosophy, the question of time reveals its decisive theological weight. As Schelling formulates this insight with striking clarity in his lectures titled *Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, if God is conceived solely as an object of contemplation, as a timeless and self-enclosed absolute, then religion itself becomes impossible. What remains is not the reality of religious life, but at best its conceptual possibility, confined within the bounds of pure reason. It is precisely at this point, Schelling argues, that systems of pure reason must acknowledge their own insufficiency. For without a God who is active, who can enter into real relation, and who can be present in history, there can be neither religion nor providence, but only a formal idea of the divine emptied of life. As he declares:

»Religion: Without an active God (who is not merely an object of contemplation), there can be no religion – for religion presupposes a real, actual relationship between humans and God – as well as no history in which God is providence. Therefore, within the science of reason, there is no religion, and thus there is no rational religion at all. [...] The conclusion of genuine, self-understanding rationalism is that nothing can be known about God.«²

This diagnosis does not reject reason as such, but exposes the point at which reason, when confined to abstract rationality, undermines the very phenomenon it seeks to explain. In contrast, Schelling's *positive philosophy*, or what he calls philosophical religion, advocates a mode of thinking that remains open to the historical and concrete forms of religion, encompassing both the mythological and the revealed. Such a philosophy makes room for a living God, one whose reality is not exhausted by conceptual determination. Yet there can be no life without becoming, no becoming without movement, and no movement without beginning and end.

For Schelling, the abstract idea of God as one without beginning and without end represents precisely a negative image of eternity: an unbroken continuity stretched into the void of empty infinity.³ This conception bars the emergence of the new and confines time to the sterile repetition of what has already been. Where there is no genuine beginning, there can be no future, only the endless circulation of death.⁴ A true beginning, by contrast, opens from within the depths of a past and toward the horizon of a future. If God, or the Absolute, is to live, then it must live not only as what is, but also as what was and as what will be.

Within philosophical religion, God's being is therefore understood as a process of becoming himself from within himself. This notion challenges conventional metaphysical assumptions, according to which becoming necessarily implies finitude and thus contradicts divine absoluteness.⁵ The difficulty, Schelling argues, arises not from the concept itself, but from a limited perspective that is unable to hold together distinct moments of being within a single unity. Becoming is typically understood as a transition from non-being to being, and thus as a mark of finitude. Yet this overlooks the fact that what is »not yet« is already contained within the ground of God. In divine becoming, nothing external is added, nor is the ground left behind or negated. Rather, what becomes affirms and complements what already is and remains there.

Ordinary processes are usually conceived through the lens of linear temporality. God's becoming, however, transcends such temporal succession. It does not unfold as a sequence of moments, but as a simultaneity in which past, present, and future are held together. Schelling's conception of divine eternity is therefore not the absence of time, but its most profound form. Eternity names the depth of temporality itself, not its negation.⁶

If God is to come to life within a philosophical system as an actual being, then the Absolute must assume the conditions of existence, including finitude and temporality. Against the crude idealism of his time, which denies the negative or primal force and thereby reduces God to an empty, abstract infinity, Schelling insists that true absoluteness is not defined by boundlessness. An infinity conceived merely as endless extension is not fullness, but lack. As he writes:

»God is often defined as the Absolute. But the Latin word *absolutum* means nothing other than something fully completed – therefore, not that which has no end in itself, not the absolutely infinite, but that which is completed and closed within itself.«⁷

The absence of beginning and end, for Schelling, is thus not a positive determination of true being, but a negative and incomplete one. True being, and especially divine being, must encompass beginning, middle, and end, the essential moments of temporality and becoming. This does not negate eternity or infinity, but redefines them. Eternity becomes a never-ending beginning, an eternal movement in which God's being is always in motion, always beginning, and never exhausted. In this sense, Schelling articulates a notion of finite infinity⁸ that allows the relation between God and world to be thought without contradiction. Divine creativity does not lie in static perfection, but in an eternal process of self-unfolding.

As Schelling himself formulates it:

»And the statement: in God, there is neither beginning nor end, means in relation to the divine being only this much: in God, there is no beginning of his beginning and no end of his end. This is the positive concept of the eternal and eternity.«⁹

⁵ For a detailed review of this classic position within scholastic thought, see sections 4.6 and 6.2 of KEMAL KIKANOVIC, *Petitionary Prayer and Divine Action: An Islamic Philosophical Model*, Paderborn Forthcoming.

⁶ For a closely related position within twentieth-century Christian theology, cf. KARL BARTH, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II, eds. G. W. BROMILEY / T. F. TORRANCE, Edinburgh, 177; *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, eds. G. W. BROMILEY / T. F. TORRANCE, Edinburgh, 437.

⁷ SW II, 2, 43.

⁸ The *Weltalter* describes its system of eternal times as an »inwardly, or dynamically infinite, yet outwardly finite or closed organism«.

⁹ SW II, 2, 43.

This positive conception of God as eternally temporal, articulated within the horizon of positive philosophy, can be more precisely understood through Schelling's unfinished middle-period project, *Die Weltalter* (1810-1815). Described by Hogrebe as the »biography of the oldest being,«¹⁰ this fragmentary work unfolds as a philosophical theogony that seeks to represent, and in a certain sense to reenact, what Schelling calls »the birth of God according to his highest self.«¹¹ The *Weltalter* is thus not merely a speculative cosmology, but an attempt to think the inner life of the absolute as a living, temporal process.

From its very inception, the *Weltalter* declares that if the Absolute is to be alive, it must not only be, but become. Schelling speaks here of an eternal becoming that has arisen from freedom, and still always becomes and always will become. This becoming begins eternally and ends eternally. It does not unfold within time as a finite sequence, but constitutes the very ground from which time itself emerges.

The temporal God of the *Weltalter*, or more precisely the archè as life, becomes the condition of possibility for an organic view of the world. Divine life is marked by an eternal, though forgotten, past: an elevated before that precedes all existence without being reducible to non-being. This primordial past is the inexhaustible source that has initiated this becoming from all eternity, initiates it still, and always will initiate it. The absolute is thus not exhausted in presence, but bears within itself a depth of time that can never be fully retrieved.

Accordingly, in *The Earliest Conception of the Ages of the World*¹², Schelling does not begin his inquiry with the *I Am* of monotheistic revelation, spoken from the burning bush to Moses (Exodus 3:14), but with silence, concealment, and reserve. In a decisive break with the metaphysical tradition that seeks truth in a singular, self-identical source, he turns instead to the veiled pagan goddess, whose image speaks from behind the curtain in the temple at Saïs:

Thus, once upon a time, according to some old narratives, from under the veil of the image of Isis, spoke the intimated primal essence to the wanderer:

»I am what then was, what is, and what shall be; no mortal has lifted my veil.«¹³

What speaks here is not a self-transparent essence, but a triune One whose being is inseparable from what was, what is, and what will be. The *Weltalter*, from its earliest sketch, warns that the truth of the One cannot be grasped unless we also listen to its threefold rhythm. Mere oneness, as fixed identity, is no longer sufficient. The living absolute is not the static presence of *I Am*, but the veiled pulse of past, present, and future unfolding in a unity that remains eternally unrevealed.

To know the absolute, then, is not to unmask a presence, but to attend to its becoming. For Schelling, lifting the veil would not be revelation, but ruin: the dissolution of life's mystery into abstract identity. Instead, thought must remember how to wait before the veil, to read the folds of time where the godhead speaks not through clear-cut meanings or measurable signs, but through hints and winks – through moving symbols, images, and sounds drawn up from the depths of pre-consciousness.

10 WOLFRAM HOGREBE, Prädikation und Genesis. Metaphysik als Fundamentaleuristik im Ausgang von Schellings »Die Weltalter«, Frankfurt am Main 1989, 15.

11 SW I, 8, 303.

12 *Frühestes Conceptblatt: Gedanke der Weltalter* – a handwritten draft never intended for publication by Schelling himself – was posthumously included in the Nachlass by Manfred Schröter, editor of the critical edition of Schelling's works.

13 WA I, 187. Translation from DAVID FARRELL KRELL, *The Tragic Absolute. German Idealism and the Languishing of God*, Bloomington 2,006, 111.

Thus, the notion of being, according to the *Weltalter* system, must be opened out and stretched across not only the present, but also the always-already bygone of an eternal past before existence. This past does not stand as mere absence or non-being, but as a dark, desiring potential – the obscure and ungraspable force that stirs at the threshold of time and world. What longs to exist is not a void, but a hidden potency: the beginning as yearning, not as given.

In this way, one can grasp what has been described as Schelling's fundamental thesis in the *Weltalter*: namely, that »the true beginning is not at the beginning; there is something that precedes the beginning itself.«¹⁴ The *Weltalter*'s demonstration of the impossibility of beginning at the beginning becomes the very condition for integrating nature, matter, the elemental, and the maternal into the living movement of the absolute.¹⁵

The positive conception of matter as itself infinite, alive, and co-eternal within the absolute thus opens a path toward reunion with consciousness's long-forgotten counterpart. It is at this moment, Schelling declares, that »after having so long gone astray, philosophical science has recalled the memory of nature and of its own previous unity with her.«¹⁶ Matter is no longer what must be excluded in order to think spirit. It is what spirit must remember in order to become whole.

Methodological Remarks: Beyond Kantian Critique toward Speculative Metaphysics

The speculative ontology of time articulated in the *Weltalter* emerges from Schelling's sustained critique of Kant's critical project, focused primarily on two points: the reduction of time to a mere a priori form of intuition and the lack of systematic unity between theoretical and practical reason.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant argues that time cannot be derived from experience, since simultaneity and succession already presuppose it as their transcendental condition. Time thus functions as the a priori formal condition of all appearances.¹⁷ Yet this very status deprives it of objective reality: time possesses empirical validity only as a structure of subjective intuition, while «in itself» and in relation to things as they are, it is nothing.¹⁸ Ontologically, beings no longer exist in time; epistemologically, time becomes the necessary condition of knowledge rather than its obstacle. At the same time, time itself remains inaccessible to cognition, lacking substance or ontological depth.

This limitation extends to eternity. Within the critical framework, eternity is reduced to the idea of infinite time, understood as endless succession rather than as a qualitatively distinct mode of being.¹⁹ It functions merely as a regulative concept, while the classical

14 SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *The Abyss of Freedom*, in: SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK / FRIEDRICH WILHELM JOSEPH SCHELLING, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World*, trans. by Judith Norman, Ann Arbor 1997, 13.
15 KRELL, *The Tragic Absolute*, 108.
16 WA I, 13; Lawrence, 63.

17 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, hg. von Raymund Schmidt, Hamburg 1990 (hereafter cited as KrV), A 34.

18 KrV A 35.

19 KrV B 48.

20 Peter Neumann, *Zeit im Übergang zu Geschichte. Schellings Lehre von den Weltaltern und die Frage nach der Zeit bei Kant*, Baden-Baden 2020, 73.

21 SW I, 1, 153.

22 Ibid.

23 *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*, ed. Walter Jaeschke, in: Christoph Binkelman (ed.), *Schelling. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, 11, 6, 2, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2018, pp. 469–485.

24 Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Briefe und Dokumente*, Bd. 2, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1982, 65.

metaphysical notion of an atemporal realm grounding unity amid change becomes inaccessible. With this, metaphysics as a science sharing the timelessness of its object is effectively revoked.

Schelling's early engagement with Kant responds directly to this impasse. From his earliest writings, he challenges the confinement of time to subjective form and the resulting crisis of objectivity. Like Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who identified an implicit nihilism in transcendental idealism, Schelling recognizes the danger of a philosophy that cannot secure the reality of its own conditions.²⁰ Yet rather than abandoning critique, he seeks to radicalize it by grounding its presuppositions.

In *On the I as Principle of Philosophy* (1795), Schelling argues that if space and time are merely forms of intuition, they cannot precede all synthesis, but must themselves depend on a higher unifying principle. Kant's failure, he suggests, lies not in analysis but in system: theoretical and practical reason remain unconnected by a common ground.²¹ For Schelling, this split becomes most visible in the aporia of an absolute beginning of time in time, which demands a deeper foundation.

That foundation can be found only in freedom.²² A truly systematic philosophy must unify its first and last principles, grounding theoretical reason in the ultimate aim of practical reason. This demand for unity defines the emergence of German Idealism and finds early expression in the *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* (1796)²³, which calls for the subordination of metaphysics to ethics, that is, to freedom as the »alpha and omega of all philosophy«. ²⁴ In Schelling's hands, freedom is universalized and ontologized: both nature and spirit emerge from a common source, the unconditioned.

From this point onward, the guiding philosophical question shifts from how the world is given to how it must be structured to make freedom possible. The critical project thus transforms into a creative and aesthetic one. Philosophy must become speculative and symbolic in order to give sensuous form to ideas that cannot be exhausted conceptually. This orientation, already anticipated in the *Systemprogram*, underlies Schelling's *physics with wings*, i.e. his *Naturphilosophie*, and culminates in his later positive philosophy.

Seen in this light, the speculative theology and temporal ontology of the *Weltalter* are not deviations from critical philosophy, but its consequence. By restoring ontological weight to time and grounding it in freedom rather than in subjective form alone, Schelling opens the conceptual space in which a living, temporal absolute can be thought.

The Architecture of Eternal Time in the *Weltalter*

Against this background, the *Weltalter* can be read as Schelling's most sustained attempt to rethink time beyond its reduction to a sequence of empty, homogeneous points. What is at stake here is nothing less than the possibility of radical freedom. An unconditional beginning in time cannot be accounted for if time itself is conceived merely as formal succession. Such a beginning would already be conditioned by what precedes it. Schelling therefore argues that freedom demands a different concept of time, one that is organic rather than formal, internally articulated rather than externally imposed, and rooted in eternity rather than opposed to it.

While Schelling retains the Kantian insight that time cannot be understood as an object among objects, he radically expands the scope of subjectivity. Time is no longer confined to human inner sense, but is understood as originating within beings themselves. Every being participates, according to its mode, in the emergence of time. In this post-Kantian

ontology, time is not merely subjective, but ontological: it arises from within existence as its inner articulation. Eternity and temporality no longer stand in opposition. Instead, eternal temporality and temporal eternity coexist, as time emerges from eternity itself without exhausting it.

Schelling undertakes this rethinking in the *Weltalter* by confronting what he calls »the great riddle of all time«²⁵: the problem of creation as an *absolute beginning*. The question is how the differentiated life of time can emerge from eternity without reducing becoming to mere derivation. The response proposed in the *Weltalter* emerges from what Schelling names the abyss of freedom (*Abgrund der Freiheit*), a decentered first principle that precedes all determinate oppositions.²⁶ If the beginning is rooted in a ground that is not a ground in the strict sense, but an eternal movement of ungrounding, then the opposition between time and eternity is suspended from the outset rather than resolved after the fact.

For a beginning to be truly free, Schelling insists, it must not depend on a source external to itself. If time were grounded in a rigid, atemporal principle that already contains all future determinations, the present would lose its reality and the future its openness. Time would then be nothing more than the illusory unfolding of a pre-established order.

This critique is directed at traditional metaphysical models of creation, especially those based on emanation or division, which imagine temporal plurality as the fragmentation of a perfect, immobile unity. Such accounts are mere »words without meaning«, Schelling argues, as they fail to grasp the originality of becoming and the living character of the eternal.²⁷ Against the abstract opposition of eternity and time, the *Weltalter* reconceives eternity as that which contains time within itself without being exhausted by it.

Eternity is thus no longer a static counter-image to temporal succession, but a living process in which temporal moments participate. It is not the sum of moments taken together, but that which coexists with each moment, revealing itself fully in every temporal articulation. Time is neither negation nor mere appearance, but a constitutive expression of the eternal itself. In this alternative conception, eternity is not an inert, static entity but rather encompasses a sequence of events that are as eternal as eternity itself.²⁸

With this shift, the metaphysical paradigm moves from hierarchical emanation to an organic and reciprocal relation between eternity and time. Creation becomes an ongoing, self-generating process rather than a singular act of division. This vision encapsulates Schelling's attempt to reconcile the oneness of the eternal with the plurality and contingency of temporal existence. In this sense, the *Weltalter* articulates a conception of absolute temporality in which freedom, plurality, and contingency emerge from within what Schelling calls a »living eternity,« drawing their power from it rather than standing in opposition to it.²⁹

The *Weltalter* identifies the affirmative concept of unconditional eternity (*der bejahende Begriff der unbedingten Ewigkeit*) as a will that does not will. This abyss of eternal freedom lies beyond being and determination: a pure will that is not compelled even to will itself. Precisely because it wills nothing, however, it cannot produce differentiation, determination, or alterity. Conceived as immovable self-identity, such eternity cannot be the origin of temporal multiplicity or radical novelty.³⁰

25 WA II, 51.

26 For more on the *Weltalter's* abyssal first potency see KURT APPEL, *Zeit und Gott. Mythos und Logos der Zeit im Anschluss an Hegel und Schelling*, Paderborn 2008, 140.147.

27 WA II, 52.

28 WA I, 40.

29 SW I, 8, 260.

30 SW I, 8, 132.

31 SW I, 8, 260.

32 WA I, 33.

33 SW I, 8, 263.

34 WA II, 136.

35 WA I, 33.

36 *Ibid.*

For time to emerge, Schelling therefore posits another will within eternity itself: a particular will that wills something. Without this inner differentiation, existence as such would be impossible. The living world of determinate beings presupposes singularity and decision within the eternal, not merely beyond it.

Accordingly, the *Weltalter* rejects the metaphysical image of eternity as a pure, changeless Now. If no present can exist without a past that underlies it, then no eternal present can exist without an eternal past.³¹ Eternity must therefore include within itself the conditions of time, not as its opposite, but as an internal dimension. Schelling names this dimension the eternal past: the ground that incessantly (un)grounds existence and enables individuality, both divine and human. It is described as the bearer of nothingness, not as non-being, but as that which itself cannot be.³²

A philosophical system that recognizes only the pure integrity (*reine Lauterkeit*) of the will that wills nothing, while excluding the particular, temporal, and material will, remains unable to account for the emergence of life. Only the dynamic interplay of these two wills can bridge the gap between eternal repose and temporal existence. The Absolute is thus inherently twofold, characterized by an inner polarity whose tension becomes the source of being.

It is this immanent dynamism that renders each beginning genuinely original and free. Only an Absolute capable of being affected by time, and of altering its own past through temporal process, can sustain a real future, one that neither repeats the past nor severs itself from it.

The consciousness of eternity (*das Bewußtseyen der Ewigkeit*), as articulated in the *Weltalter*, is therefore intrinsically temporal. It becomes possible only through the distinction and simultaneity of times. Schelling finds traces of this structure in revelation itself, pointing to the divine name given to Moses, whose Hebrew formulation holds past, present, and future together in a single expression: I am who I was, I was who I will be, I will be who I am.³³

Such temporal consciousness is necessarily relational. It presupposes an other that grounds and differentiates life. This other, which both grounds and unsettles the original being, Schelling names primordial nature (*Urnatur*): that to which the Spirit of Eternity relates in order to become alive.

Primordial nature forms the material ground of the Absolute's inner life and thereby of absolute temporality itself. Schelling conceives this ground as a material trinity, whose dynamic interaction makes the three temporal dimensions of the Absolute possible. This trinity unfolds through three potencies: first, the Primordial Mother (*Urmutter*), the externally negating will, which bears and gives rise to the first time³⁴; second, the Word of Love, the will toward existence, which posits time as such and opens the possibility of temporality³⁵; and third, *Sophia* or the World-Soul, which holds the future as the horizon of reconciliation and embodies the totality of times.

Through the organic interplay of these primordial potencies, time is not merely generated once but continuously sustained. With the differentiation of the negating and affirming wills, these principles acquire relative independence, yet they remain equally eternal and inseparably bound within one being. They do not function as parts of a whole but as co-originating forces whose unity precedes their opposition. The immaculate will (*Lauterkeit*) thus manifests itself simultaneously as the will toward concealment and stability and as the will toward revelation and expansion. As the *Weltalter* formulates it, one and the same will becomes two: a negating and an affirming will.

This inner contradiction is not a defect but the condition of life itself. Schelling describes contradiction as the »poison of all life,« while insisting that all movement of life resembles a snake dance consists in the attempt to overcome this poison.³⁶ The highest contradiction

therefore gives rise to the highest movement. Life persists through the tension of opposing forces held in equilibrium, while the possibility of their unity remains always implied within their opposition. This unity, however, does not exist as a present fact but as an eternal future, perpetually approaching yet never fully given.

Within this trinitarian dynamic, Schelling identifies the unifying force as spirit (*Geist*), a unity that is never simply at hand. Spirit is not a stable synthesis but an ever-becoming reality, generated moment by moment through the ongoing struggle between negation and affirmation. From the standpoint of the present, this unity remains futural, emerging only through the movement of reconciliation itself.³⁷

The triune principles of life are thus revealed as the principles of eternal time. Past, present, and future arise together in every moment, not as successive stages but as internally differentiated dimensions. In the struggle of forces, being is posited as present, being-itself as past, and their full reconciliation as future. Time therefore arises in every instant as whole time: a dynamic unity in which past, present, and future are simultaneously held apart and bound together.³⁸

These temporal dimensions stand in mutual opposition. Each excludes the others within its own sphere: the past negates present and future, the present negates past and future, and yet this very exclusion generates the need for reconciliation. The unity that overcomes this opposition emerges only in the sphere of the eternal future, where Yes and No are brought together without annulment. Affirmation requires negation as its ground, just as negation yearns toward affirmation to attain essence. From the intensification of this opposition, a higher unity arises: a futural spirit of mutual self- and other-recognition.

The vitality of the Absolute thus depends on its three-dimensional structure. It must embody opposition in past and present while sustaining unity as future. Only together do these primordial forces fulfill the concept of divinity; none can exist either with or without the others. This mutual impossibility constitutes the ethical necessity of the system: unity and duality, Yes and No, must be held together for freedom and progressive life to be possible.³⁹

Eternal time is born from this impossibility. Reconciliation cannot take the form of static balance, but only of movement. Time emerges as the continual realization of this movement, the ongoing sequencing of forces that never abolishes contradiction but transforms it into life.

Within the framework of the *Weltalter* project, being is attributed with the character of original essential beginning. The time of the *Weltalter* is, in every moment, the whole time springing from the center of tension between the fundamental moments of eternal past and the ever-coming future. God, or the Absolute, enjoys this beginningless, everlasting beginning and the endless end in the most complete form, and it is precisely in this that His creative truth consists.

37 WA I, 120.

38 WA I, 35.

39 SW I, 8, 217.

40 The so-called *ḥadīth al-kanz al-makhfī* («the hidden treasure»), commonly cited as *كُنْث كَنْزًا مَخْفِيًّا*, is widely received within both Sunni and Shī'ī mystical traditions. Beyond its extensive use in Sufi litera-

ture, it also plays a significant role in Shī'ī philosophical theology, particularly in post-Avicennan and Sadrian metaphysics, where it functions as a speculative articulation of creation grounded in love and divine self-disclosure.

41 Shams-i Tabrīzī. *Maqālāt* (مقالات). Tehran, 1349 [1970], 299. Persian.

This framework enables Schelling to propose an alternative order of times in which the future is not bound to follow the dictates of the past. In the world of the *Weltalter*, there is no single primordial beginning located deep in cosmic history that determines all subsequent development. If every moment bears within itself a new beginning, then the beginning itself cannot remain unchanged. In each moment, the future sets the entire span of times into motion as its past-beginning. Time is thus always and forever beginning-past (*anfangs vergangen*).

Schelling repeatedly insists that genesis (*Zeugung*) is never a process that concludes. It is a constant work that grants history intelligibility by shaping it into epochs and ages, revealing the world itself as incipient (*anfänglich*). This *Anfänglichkeit des Seins* sets not only time but eternity itself into motion, as both undergo transformation with each new beginning. For in every moment, it is eternal unity itself that is unveiled and externalized as time.

An Islamic Resonance of Absolute Temporality

The speculative reconfiguration of time developed in Schelling's *Weltalter* is not confined to a Christian theological horizon. While it does not offer a transferable theology, it opens a philosophical space in which certain themes of Islamic thought may become newly intelligible, provided the Qur'anic text is approached without the metaphysical presupposition that strictly opposes linear time to a timeless, immutable eternity.

One point of resonance concerns the idea of creation as an ever-renewed beginning. The Qur'anic formula *kun fa-yakūn* (Be! And it is) does not merely express divine omnipotence but suggests an immediate, instantiating mode of creation. Read through the lens of absolute temporality as presented briefly in this article, creation need not be understood as a completed act located in the past, but as a continuous coming-into-being, occurring in discrete instants rather than through linear succession.

A related intuition appears in a well-known *ḥadīth qudsī* widely cited in Sufi literature, in which God describes Himself as a hidden treasure who loved to be known and therefore brought creation into being.⁴⁰ Here, creation is inseparable from relation, recognition, and love: the world comes to be not independently of human consciousness and affective disposition, but through them. In this sense, the centrality of love in the relationship between God and human beings in Islamic thought may be read as bearing witness to a conception of the divine that does not withdraw from temporality or individual existence, but remains dynamically engaged with them.

Mystical interpretations radicalize this insight. In Sufi literature, Qur'an 2:259 is read not only as a demonstration of resurrection at the end of time, but as a disclosure of the structure of reality itself. Shams of Tabriz interprets the destruction and reconstitution of the world shown to a single witness as revealing what happens at every moment: the world is incessantly destroyed and recreated.⁴¹ Within this perspective, *qiyāma* is no longer confined to a future point in time but names a futural dimension accompanying every present.

Such views challenge theological frameworks that presuppose a strict separation between time and eternity. By allowing these dimensions to interpenetrate, Sufi thought renders intelligible otherwise marginal statements in Qur'an and *ḥadīth*. Within this horizon, human freedom and responsibility acquire a constitutive role. The frequently

cited *ḥadīth qudsī* on *qurb al-nawāfil* (قُرْبُ النَّوَافِلِ), transmitted in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, to which Sufi thinkers repeatedly return, describes how God becomes the seeing eye and the acting hand of the one He loves. Read in terms of absolute temporality, this points to a conception in which temporal human action participates in the manner of divine self-disclosure.⁴²

From a comparative-theological perspective, Schelling's philosophy does not resolve internal Islamic theological questions. What it offers is a speculative ontology of time that loosens the binary of timeless eternity versus finite time. In doing so, it opens a horizon in which Qur'anic and Sufi reflections on creation, resurrection, and divine action may be reread as articulations of a living, temporally engaged divine life.

Conclusion: Toward a Temporal Absolute Across Theological Horizons

The speculative framework developed in the *Weltalter* allows the question of God and time to be posed anew. Rather than conceiving eternity and temporality as mutually exclusive, Schelling articulates an absolute temporality in which time belongs to the inner life of the Absolute itself. Eternity is no longer the negation of becoming, but its deepest dimension; time is no longer a defect of finitude, but the medium through which freedom, difference, and novelty become possible. In this sense, the demand for a temporal God does not arise from speculative excess, but from the necessity of accounting for historical reality, ethical responsibility, and the lived forms of religious life.

The present contribution has not sought to resolve the theological tensions surrounding divine temporality, nor to replace classical metaphysical conceptions of God. Its aim has instead been to suggest a shift of perspective. By rethinking time, matter, and eternity together, Schelling offers a philosophical horizon in which divine absoluteness and historical becoming no longer stand in contradiction. Such a horizon preserves freedom and individuality while allowing for a world marked by plurality, change, and creative emergence.

This perspective also opens a question that can only be indicated here: whether such a reconfiguration of time and eternity might speak beyond its immediate philosophical context, particularly to Islamic theology. A full engagement would require careful attention to Qur'anic thought, *kalām* debates, philosophical traditions, and mystical practices, and lies beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, two brief points of orientation may be noted.

First, classical Islamic philosophy, especially in thinkers such as Avicenna and Al-Farabi, develops triadic ontological structures shaped by Neoplatonic inheritance. The articulation of the One, Intellect (Nous or Logos), and Soul seeks to explain how multiplicity and intelligibility emerge without compromising divine unity. At a structural level, this resonates with Schelling's attempt to think internal differentiation within the Absolute without dissolving it into mere plurality. The affinity here is not doctrinal but architectural: in both cases, unity is preserved precisely by allowing for an inner articulation of life and becoming.

⁴² For a detailed analysis see: Tanāz Rashidi-Nasab, «Qurb al-Nawāfil in Islamic Mysticism», «Persian research article, Birjand, 2017.

Second, the Sufi tradition of Islam offers a rich field of reflection on divine temporality and embodiment. Sufi thought persistently affirms the desire for an experiential, even corporeal, encounter with the divine, a desire not external to Islamic sources themselves. The well-known divine hadith in which God becomes the hearing ear, the seeing eye, and the acting hand of the beloved servant articulates a mode of divine presence that unfolds within human, temporal, and bodily life. Read through the lens developed here, such expressions need not be reduced to metaphor. They may instead point toward a conception of the sacred in which time and materiality are not degradations of divinity, but privileged sites of its self-disclosure.

These brief indications suggest that the speculative ontology of time articulated in the *Weltalter* does not stand in principled opposition to Islamic theology. On the contrary, it may offer a philosophical language capable of articulating dimensions already present within its philosophical and mystical traditions, without erasing doctrinal specificity or historical difference. Whether such a dialogue can be responsibly developed remains an open task. What has been proposed here is only that the question itself is both legitimate and promising.

If eternity is no longer opposed to time, but lives through it, then the sacred itself must be thought as capable of change without loss, of difference without fragmentation, and of history without surrendering absoluteness. In this sense, the temporal God is not a theological anomaly, but the name for a divine life that remains faithful to freedom, to creation, and to the ever-renewed beginning of the world. ♦
